

Sermon Notes & References  
A Cure for What Ails Us  
Isaiah 1:16-20  
May 17, 2009

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<sup>A</sup> Isaiah 1:3, 5-6; 2 Peter 3:9  
<sup>B</sup> James 4:8, Matthew 23:27, Ezekiel 36:25-27  
<sup>C</sup> John 3:7  
<sup>D</sup> Jeremiah 35:13, Matthew 11:28-29  
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<sup>G</sup> Matthew 22:5-7  
<sup>H</sup> John 1:10-12  
<sup>I</sup> 1 John 1:9, Isaiah 1:18

A. Introduction

1. The Mule

- a. I heard this story so long ago that I had forgotten it until Adrian Beros and I got into a conversation Friday evening.
- b. Farmer Brown claimed that the mule he was selling was as obedient as could be; speak a word of command to it and the mule would just what you said.
- c. So the man bought the mule and went to take it home.
- d. 'Come along, mule' ... the mule didn't budge
- e. 'Let's get going, mule' ... not the slightest movement
- f. 'Say, Brown, you told me that this mule was obedient'
- g. Silently farmer Brown picked up a heavy stick and hit the mule on the forehead and said quietly, 'Get along, mule'
- h. At this the mule trotted along by his new owner as the farmer explained: 'First, you have to get his attention!'

2. Sometimes God must take drastic measures to get our attention

- a. some of the word pictures in Isaiah are striking
- b. some of his language brief, abrupt and powerful
- c. for, you see, God wanted to get Israel's attention
- d. 'An ox knows its owner, And a donkey its master's manger, *But* Israel does not know, My people do not understand.' (Isaiah 1:3)
- e. we are often mulish, so God wants to get our attention, too
- f. *The Lord ... is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.* (2 Peter 3:9)
- g. here is how God describes Judah, which is also a pretty good description of humanity without God:
- h. ... *The whole head is sick And the whole heart is faint. 6 From the sole of the foot even to the head There is nothing sound in it, ...* (Isaiah 1:5b-6a)

### 3. That's God's Diagnosis

- a. as given through Isaiah; it is not mine, but God's
- b. the problem, as we saw last week, is sin
- c. that's what ails us; so, what's the cure for what ails us
- d. we find the answer in today's text, Isaiah 1:16-20 and we will summarise the text in three words
  - (A) Change, vv 16-17
  - (B) Come, v 18
  - (C) Accept, vv 19-20

### B. Change . . . . . Isaiah 1:16-17

1. **Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.**
  - a. eight admonitions from God for man to change
  - b. the first 3 being turning from the bad
  - c. the last 4 being turning to the good
  
2. turning from the bad
  - a. first, washing and cleansing; let's spend some time on this
    - (A) now, the very context makes it clear that this is not washing in a physical but in a moral sense, as it is in James 4:8: **'Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.'**
    - (B) the Pharisees had extreme rules concerning physical washing but Jesus saw through their sham, saying this: **'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness'.** (Matthew 23:27)
    - (C) was Isaiah, then, talking about ceremonial washings?
    - (D) no; hear God's words through a later prophet on this: **'Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from**

your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.' (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

- (E) the cleansing God seeks is internal not external; spiritual not physical; one that is the Holy Spirit's work
- b. second, remove the evil deeds from God's sight
  - (A) if you look back at verse 15, you will read that God will not listen to the prayer of the people, he will hide His eyes from them, because their 'hands are covered with blood' – actually, 'bloods' in the plural, meaning bloodshed or violent deeds
  - (B) so now, they must correct that situation
  - (C) taking their deeds out of view of the All-Seeing One
  - (D) which, of course, leaves us with the question, 'How?'
  - (E) In the last analysis, the only thing that could wash away the blood of violence was the blood of Christ. (EJY)
- c. third, ceasing doing evil
  - (A) set out on a new path; begin a new life
  - (B) now, we see more clearly that God, through Isaiah, is talking in NT terms: 'you must be born again'
  - (C) the wrestling of the child of God against temptation, against the old nature, against the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life
  - (D) how was one, just described as sick from the toes up – or, in Paul's words, 'dead in trespasses and sins' – to bring such a great change about?
- 3. not only that, but there was to be turning to the good
  - a. what is described here is no less than repentance
    - (A) the 180° turn from doing the bad
    - (B) about face, turning to do good
    - (C) and exemplified in 5 short, practical statements, v. 17
  - b. 'Learn to do good' – become disciples of God
    - (A) Oh, how slow we are to listen and learn
    - (B) a century later in Jeremiah says – Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Go and say to

the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, "Will you not receive instruction by listening to My words?" declares the LORD.' (Jeremiah 35: 13)

- (C) 'The people are like scholars who had not even learned their first lesson' (Calvin)
  - (D) and Jesus, too, would have us first learn from Him: 'Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and "you will find rest for your souls."' (Matthew 11:28-29)
  - (E) this is foundational to every other good work
  - (F) these are stated in rapid-fire style: underscoring the prophet's authority, the urgency of God's command
- c. 'seek justice'
- (A) yes, it is appropriate these days to sign petitions and to seek to bring civil justice in our land, because, 'Righteousness exalts a nation, But sin is a disgrace to *any* people.' (Proverbs 14:34)
  - (B) but what is in view here extends to every sphere of life
  - (C) and as the three practical examples that follow show
    - (1) curtailing oppression of the strong upon the weak
    - (2) providing judgement on behalf of the orphan
    - (3) taking the part of the widow
    - (4) it means helping the vulnerable in our society
  - (D) I heard an unknown interviewee on CBC radio this past week say that difference in religion is not the greatest problem of accepting of new Canadians, but rather race. In fact, those having the greatest difficulty as a minority group, are Christian Protestants who are black. — What a failure of the Christian church in the area of justice! What an indictment!
- d. so the call is to repentance
- (A) a repentance that turns a person from evil
  - (B) a repentance that turns a person to the good
  - (C) a repentance, such as that sought by John the Baptist, who '... when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance."' (Matthew 3:7-8) – a fruit-bearing repentance

4. but, the objection comes from the sensitive listener
  - a. 'But I can't do all this; I've tried before and failed!'
  - b. because merely turning over a new leaf, merely engaging in some acts of penance, is not what is involved, but a thorough heart re-formation such as God only can effect
  - c. but there is, nevertheless, a human responsibility
  - d. which brings us to our second word: –

C. Come . . . . . Isaiah 1:18

1. 'Come now, and let us reason together,' Says the LORD, 'Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.'
  - a. this is an invitation, and an invitation requires acceptance
  - b. the 'now' does not denote time, but a gentleness of a plea (in fact the Hebrew word can be translated, 'please'), as in the phrase, 'Come now, you cannot mean that!'
  - c. but when God is the One giving the invitation, it is not lightly to be ignore or refused
  - d. you will recall the Lord Jesus' parable of the king (who clearly represents God) giving a wedding feast for his son and when the servants followed up the invitations, 'But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them.' (Matthew 22:5-6) – how did the king respond? The next verse tells us: 'But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire.' (Matthew 22:7)
  - e. God's invitations are ignored at your own peril
2. The scene in this chapter is somewhat like a legal case
  - a. in verses 2-3 God calls upon the covenant witnesses of heaven and earth, as well as the animal kingdom
  - b. then he lays out the case
    - (A) their hopeless sinfulness in verse 4
    - (B) their heedlessness towards correction, vv 5-9
    - (C) their worthless religious efforts, vv 10-15
  - c. and after calling for repentance in vv 16-17
  - d. He lays aside for a moment His judge's gavel, as it were

- e. and says, in effect,
    - (A) 'Let's settle this out of court
    - (B) because, if we proceed in the court of judgement
    - (C) then you are going to lose and lose badly,
    - (D) because, by your own power, you cannot change,
    - (E) and change is what is needed; radical change.'
  - f. listen to the nature of that change
3. in this reasoning together, this entering the discussion
- a. the question of what is sin, and what is not
    - (A) is not to be found in the philosophies of man
    - (B) nor in the laws that man establishes
    - (C) (yet Christians should not only pray for rulers but also that God will give them just magistrates and laws)
    - (D) for, as we saw last week, both in Isaiah's day and ours
    - (E) we live in a sick society: with deluded ideas of sin
  - b. so, the first requirement of settling this out of court
    - (A) of discussing this with the holy God
    - (B) is recognizing God's view of sin is reasonable, not as it appears before our fellow men, but before God
    - (C) we have to take His view, not ours, of what sin is
  - c. and your sin, says God, is blood-red
4. Though your sin is as Scarlet, Crimson
- a. make no mistake about it; there is no doubt about the fact in that word 'though' – what I say, says God, is the truth
  - b. we are told that 'scarlet was regarded as the most fast or fixed of colours. Neither their dew, nor rain, nor washing, no long use could remove it.'<sup>{3}</sup>
  - c. so, how could this become as snow? – I was amused that one writer qualified this as 'fresh-fallen snow.' Sounds as though he lived in a city like Toronto. We are blessed by having snow on some of our

property stay dazzling white for weeks on end ... but I am glad its all gone!

- d. how could this scarlet, crimson sin become as wool?
- e. it can only be of God's doing
- f. what an out of court settlement: God is proposing to clear up our greatest problem, to pay off our enormous debt
- g. to transform the stain of our sin, to the mark of His purity
- h. how can this be? What must I do to be saved?

D. Accept . . . . . Isaiah 1:19-20

1. 'If you consent and obey, You will eat the best of the land; But if you refuse and rebel, You will be devoured by the sword.' Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken.
  
2. these verses lay out a choice
  - a. the choice is expressed in vivid terms: Eat, or be eaten!
  - b. two sharply contrasting acts of the will are set in bold relief
    - (A) willingly listening – that's hearkening; hearing with an intent to obey; paying attention; and the other is
    - (B) wilfully rebelling: stopping the ears, setting one's mind to do the very opposite of what is said
  - c. and with these come two equally differing results
    - (A) that of blessing
      - (1) in the OT vernacular, enjoying the best of the land of promise that God had given to them
      - (2) in the NT, rejoicing in God's presence forever
    - (B) and that of cursing
      - (1) as Judah, taken from the land, slain, captive, or,
      - (2) of mankind, an eternity of separation from God
  
3. every person has a choice
  - a. so that when God's judgement shall come
  - b. we know that the 'judge of all the earth shall do right.'
  - c. no man, woman, or child will be able to say

- (A) I didn't have a chance
- (B) I didn't have a choice
- d. because whether it is the revelation
  - (A) of the word of God, or
  - (B) of creation
  - (C) the verdict on mankind, as found in the first three chapters of Romans, particularly chapter 1
  - (D) is that each of us must say, 'I have willingly sinned; I have willingly ignored Him and done my own thing.'
- e. unless we have accepted the provision that God has made for our sin and for our salvation: 'But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.' (John 1:12-13)

## E. Invitation

1. sin has spoiled man's relationship with God as He intended
  - a. are you a Christian? Has sin has become the dominating power in your life – then cleansing is offered to you: 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' (1 John 1:9 NAS95)
  - b. have you not yet trusted in Christ? Cleansing is offered to you: "'Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.'" (Isaiah 1:18 NAS95)
2. Take the opportunity today to make things right with God.

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3. Kitto, as quoted in *The Biblical Museum – in loc*